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Low-temperature formation of source–drain contacts in self-aligned amorphous oxide thin-film transistors

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We demonstrated self-aligned amorphous-Indium-Gallium-Zinc-Oxide (a-IGZO) thin-film transistors (TFTs) where the source–drain (S/D) regions were made conductive via chemical reduction of the a-IGZO via metallic calcium (Ca). Due to the higher chemical reactivity of Ca, the process can be operated at lower temperatures. The Ca process has the additional benefit of the reaction byproduct calcium oxide being removable through a water rinse step, thus simplifying the device integration. The Ca-reduced a-IGZO showed a sheet resistance (R_{SHEET}) value of 0.7 k Ω /sq., with molybdenum as the S/D metal. The corresponding a-IGZO TFTs exhibited good electrical properties, such as a field-effect mobility (μ_{FE}) of 12.0 cm²/(V s), a subthreshold slope (SS^{-1}) of 0.4 V/decade, and an on/off current ratio ($I_{\text{ON/OFF}}$) above 10⁸.

1. Introduction

In recent years, amorphous oxide semiconductors (AOSs) have emerged as alternative materials for amorphous silicon thin-film transistor (TFT) in display backplane manufacturing. These materials demonstrate significant advantages, including high uniformity, high electron mobility, and the ability to be fabricated at temperatures compatible with plastic substrates. Among these AOSs, amorphous-Indium-Gallium-Zinc-Oxide (a-IGZO) is very promising for the fabrication of a new generation of active TFTs for use in transparent displays, touch screens, smart windows, and other devices on flexible and rigid substrates [1–4]. Future display backplane generations with increasing resolutions (e.g. 3640 × 2160 pixels) and frame rates (120 or 240 Hz) require high speed TFTs. The established back-channel-etch and etch-stop-layer configuration-based TFTs are less suitable for such applications due to their high parasitic capacitance caused by the overlap between the source and drain electrodes (S/Ds) and the gate electrode [5, 6]. The self-aligned (SA) TFT configuration presents benefits such as reduced overlap capacitance and a smaller footprint, and is therefore preferred. The S/D region conductivity enhancement is one of the major integration challenges in this configuration. Various research groups have reported integration techniques for enhancing the conductivity of these S/D regions. For example, Ye *et al.* and Chen *et al.* reported high-performance SA TFTs

with S/D regions implanted with boron, phosphorus, and arsenic [7–9]. In this approach, the high temperature anneal (> 400°C) for dopant activation could be an integration challenge for the temperature-sensitive AOS materials. The integration of such TFT process flow in plastic substrates constitutes another challenge. Mourey *et al.* reported SA TFTs that use backside exposure for conductivity enhancement of S/D regions [10]. In this approach, the optical absorption of the substrate and the material stack might be disadvantageous for the process. Furthermore, thermal and bias stress stabilities could be other issues caused by this process. In another approach, Kim *et al.* and Ahn *et al.* reported argon (Ar) and hydrogen (SiH₄ and NH₃) plasma treatments for the conductivity enhancement of the S/D regions [11–14]. Although the integration of this approach in the process flow is straightforward, the corresponding transistors might suffer from degradation when submitted to thermal treatments at 250°C or higher temperatures. This can be attributed to the unstable diffusion profiles of hydrogen in the case of the hydrogen plasma and the recovery of the generated defects (an In-rich surface) in the case of the Ar plasma. Furthermore, Morosawa *et al.* reported SA TFTs with a-IGZO where the S/D regions were reduced by metallic Ti and Al [15]. The process involves deposition of a very thin layer (5–10 nm) of the metal, followed by a high temperature anneal (> 300°C) to form their oxides. During this

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process, the a-IGZO of the S/D regions is partly chemically reduced, leading to a local increase in conductivity. The uniformity of the thin metal layer over the large substrate size, the high temperature ($\geq 250^\circ\text{C}$) requirement for the chemical reaction between a-IGZO and the metal, and the removal of the formed metal oxide might complicate the integration into the process flow. All these complications can be avoided using the alkaline earth metal calcium (Ca) as a reducing agent [16]. The reduction of a-IGZO occurs during Ca deposition and the following thermal treatment at 240°C in a N_2 ambient oven, which yields S/D regions that consist of highly conductive a-IGZO.

2. Experiment details

In the first step, a barrier film was deposited on a glass substrate [17]. On top of this barrier film, an IGZO layer was deposited via DC sputtering. The a-IGZO layer was patterned via wet chemical etching, followed by deposition of the gate dielectric (200 nm SiO_2 via plasma enhanced chemical vapor deposition (PECVD) at 250°C) and the gate metal layer [100 nm of molybdenum (Mo) via DC sputtering]. The gate stack (metal and dielectric) was patterned using the dry etching process. In the next step, the Ca metal layer was deposited on the now exposed S/D regions that abutted from the patterned gate stack through evaporation, and the treated substrate was annealed on

a hot plate at 250°C in a N_2 atmosphere. This was followed by a water rinse that removed the unreacted Ca and the other byproducts. The entire device was capped with a stack of barriers and an inter-metal layer (200 nm PECVD SiO_2), followed by contact opening with a dry etching step. Mo (100 nm) was deposited via sputtering to form interconnects, and patterned by dry etching. Finally, the TFTs were annealed at 240°C in an N_2 ambient oven for one hour. All the processes were performed at a temperature below 250°C to enable integration on the polyimide foil and a range of potential moisture barriers [17]. The current–voltage (I – V) characteristics of the individual TFTs were measured using an Agilent 4156 parameter analyzer.

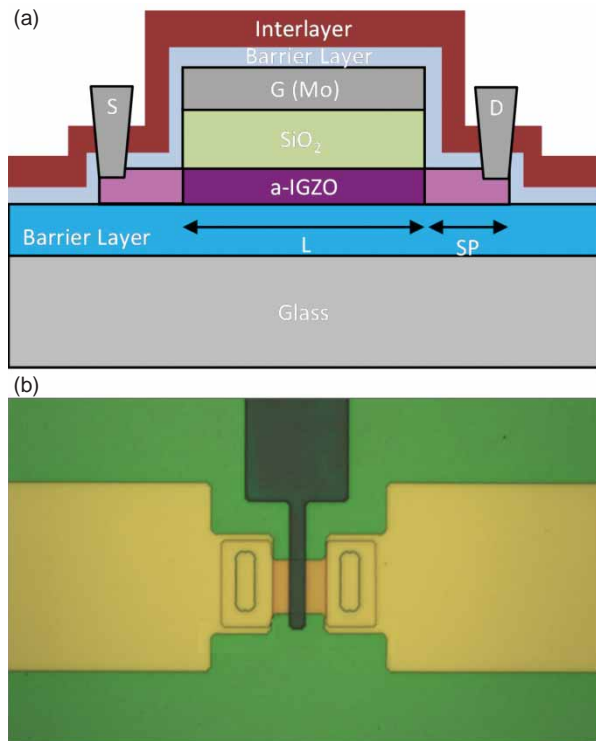


Figure 1. (a) Cross-sectional scheme and (b) optical micrograph of SA a-IGZO TFTs.

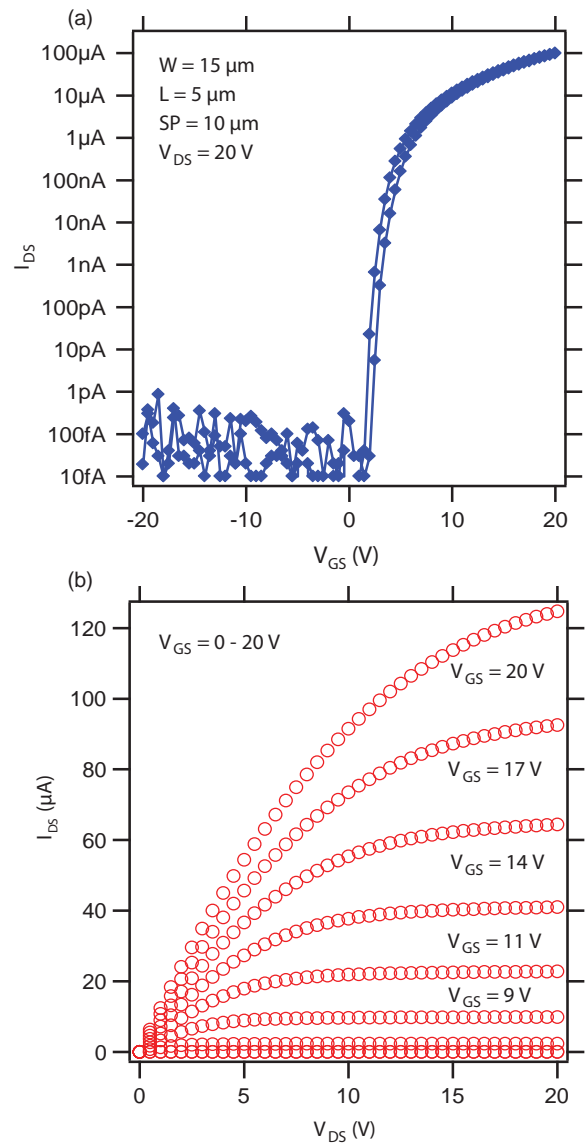


Figure 2. (a) Transfer ($V_{\text{GS}} - I_{\text{DS}}$) and (b) output ($V_{\text{DS}} - I_{\text{DS}}$) characteristics of SA TFTs with $W = 15\ \mu\text{m}$, $L = 5\ \mu\text{m}$, and $\text{SP} = 10\ \mu\text{m}$.

3. Results and discussion

A schematic cross-section and optical micrograph of an integrated SA a-IGZO TFT is shown in Figure 1. The typical transfer and output characteristics of the fabricated SA a-IGZO TFTs with $W = 15 \mu\text{m}$, $L = 5 \mu\text{m}$, and $SP = 10 \mu\text{m}$ are shown in Figure 2(a) and 2(b), respectively. The figures of merit of such TFTs at a drain-to-source voltage (V_{DS}) of 20 V are a μ_{FE} of $12.0 \text{ cm}^2/\text{Vs}$, an SS^{-1} of 0.4 V/dec, and an $I_{ON/OFF}$ ratio of $\sim 4.9 \times 10^8$. The sheet resistivity of $< 1.0 \text{ k}\Omega/\text{sq.}$ was required for the a-IGZO spacing (SP) between the gate and the metal interconnects, to prevent degradation of the aforementioned values (to maintain $R_{channel} > R_{contact}$). The aforementioned Ca treatment resulted in a sheet resistivity (R_{SHEET}) value of $0.7 \text{ k}\Omega/\text{sq.}$ The treatment is a chemical oxide-reduction reaction of the alkaline earth metal with the metal oxide semiconductor layer, additional details of which have been published [16]. In this method, when a reducing layer of an alkaline metal (e.g. any one of, or any combination of, Li, Na, K, Rb, Cs, or Fr) or an alkaline earth metal (e.g. any one of, or any combination of, Be, Mg, Ca, Sr, Ba, or Ra) come in physical contact with the metal oxide semiconductor layer, a chemical reduction reaction is initiated between the reducing layer and the metal oxide semiconductor layer. The reduction reaction affects the chemical composition of the metal oxide semiconductor layer, for instance, by decreasing the oxygen content. The treatment is completed by a rinsing step with water, in which the excess of the reducing layer and the reaction byproducts are washed away. Through this treatment, the sheet resistivity decreased from above $100 \text{ k}\Omega/\text{sq.}$ for the as-deposited a-IGZO film to $0.7 \text{ k}\Omega/\text{sq.}$ for the Ca-treated film. This low sheet resistivity even remained unaffected by an additional post anneal at 240°C in an N_2 ambient oven. In Figure 3,

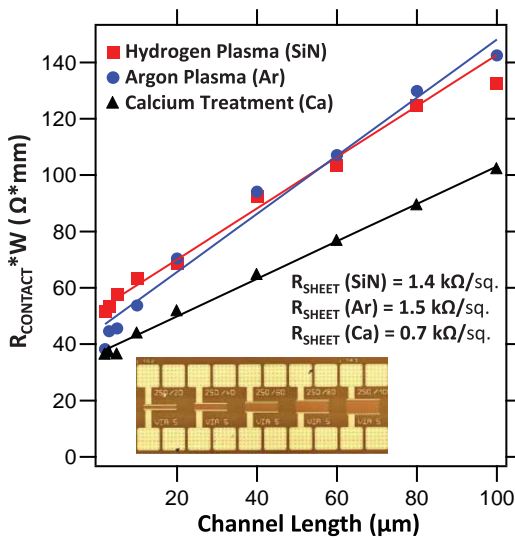


Figure 3. Dependence of the R_{SHEET} of hydrogen plasma, Ar plasma, and Ca-treated a-IGZO on the channel length at $V = 2.0$ V. The layout of the resistor structure is shown in the inset.

show the resistivity of the treated a-IGZO using separate resistor structures (figure inset) with different channel lengths (L) and a constant width (W). This method leads to the extracted R_{SHEET} value of $0.7 \text{ k}\Omega/\text{sq.}$ We also compared it with the standard hydrogen plasma (SiN_x interlayer) and the Ar plasma-treated a-IGZO, and measured the values of 1.4 and $1.5 \text{ k}\Omega/\text{sq.}$, respectively. The contact resistance between the interconnect metal and the treated a-IGZO was extracted by extrapolating the lines to the zero channel length, and was equal to the $R_{CONTACT}$ $W = 3.8 \Omega \text{ cm}$. The output characteristic [Figure 2(b)] depicted clear linear regions and did not show s -shaped behavior at a low V_{DS} , which indicates that no Schottky barrier at the S/D contacts was obtained. Furthermore, to verify that the R_{SHEET} of the gate-source contact is well distributed across the channel SP and the channel length and does not

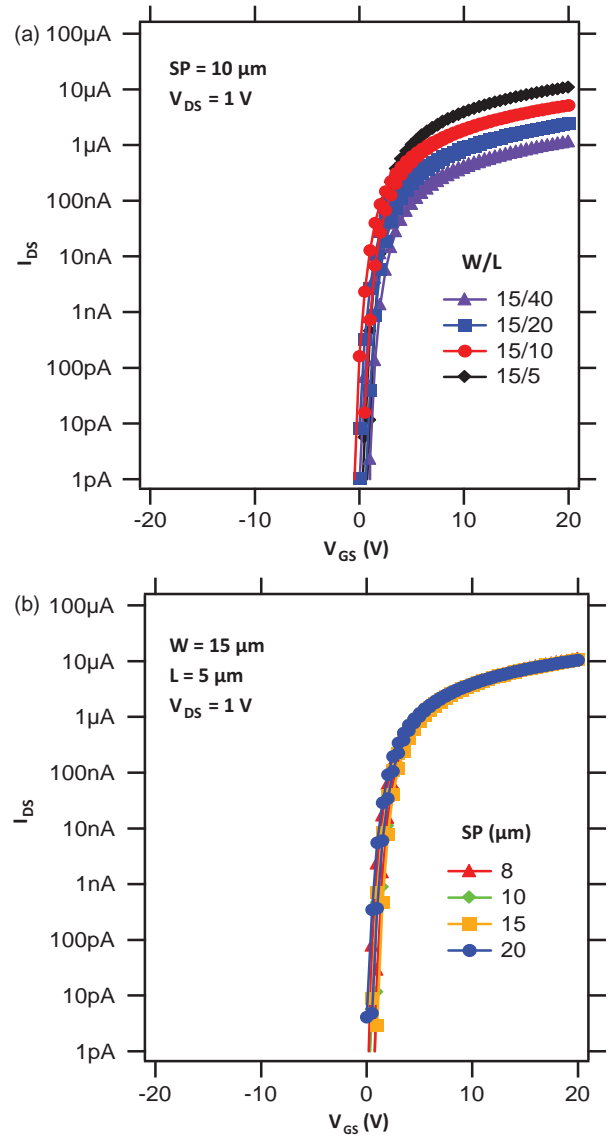


Figure 4. Transfer ($V_{GS} - I_{DS}$) characteristics dependence on (a) 'L' scaling and (b) 'SP' scaling of SA TFTs.

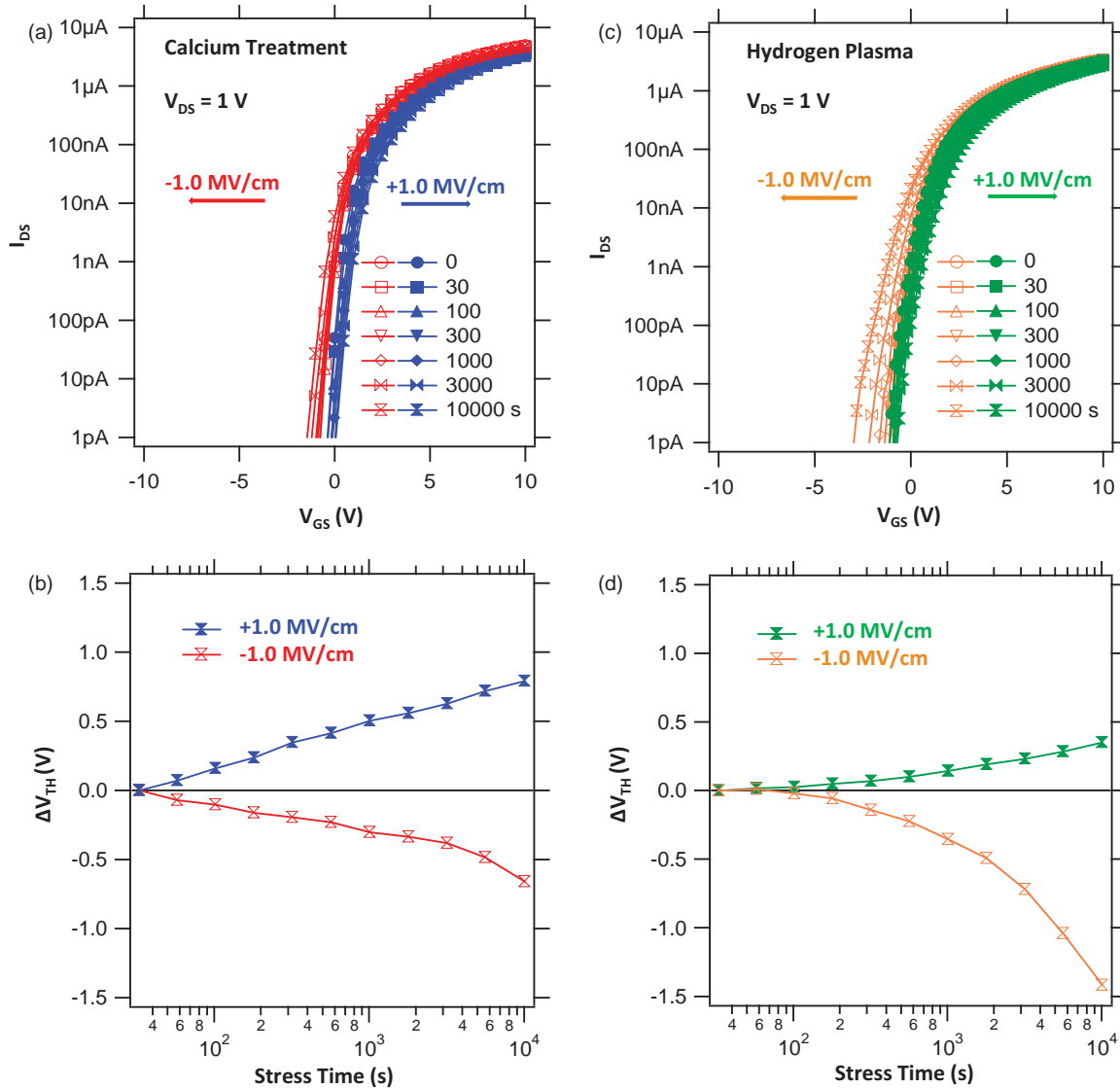


Figure 5. (a and c) Evolution of the transfer characteristics ($V_{GS} - I_{DS}$) of SA TFTs ($W = 15 \mu\text{m}$ and $L = 5 \mu\text{m}$) as a function of the duration time at $+1.0$ MV/cm ($V_{GS} = +20$ V and $V_{DS} = 0$ V) and at -1.0 MV/cm ($V_{GS} = -20$ V and $V_{DS} = 0$ V). (b and d) V_{TH} shift as a function of the stress time in the positive and negative directions.

limit the TFT performance, the transfer characteristics (at $V_{DS} = 1$ V) of the TFTs with different spacings between their channel and interconnects ($SP = 8, 10, 15$, and $20 \mu\text{m}$) and with different channel lengths ($L = 40, 20, 10$, and $5 \mu\text{m}$) are compared in Figure 4(a) and 4(b), respectively. From Figure 4(a), it is clear that the SP length of 8–20 μm did not result in a change in the TFT characteristics, meaning that the resistivity of the S/D regions is well distributed over a wide SP range and low enough for the total device resistance to be dominated by the resistivity of the channel. For the TFTs with the shortest channels, that is, 5 μm , no degradation of the mobility and subthreshold slope (SS^{-1}) was observed, as shown in Figure 4(b). This indicates that no lateral diffusion of the Ca treatment into the channel region occurred, which can cause

channel shortening effects. In reference [16], the effect of the a-IGZO thickness on the Ca treatment is described. It shows that the effect of the Ca treatment is very strong for thin a-IGZO layers (13 nm) and stabilizes for thicker a-IGZO layers (26, 40, and 60 nm). This is a clear indication that the effect of the Ca treatment affects up to a maximum 20–30 nm of a-IGZO. This is also in line with the time-of-flight secondary ion mass spectrometry analysis, demonstrating that traces of Ca within the a-IGZO decrease very strongly within the first 20–30 nm of a-IGZO [16]. Since a-IGZO is amorphous, the channel region must be affected in a similar way in all directions. Assuming that a-IGZO would be affected to 50 nm (instead of the aforementioned 20–30 nm), the channel should shorten by a maximum of 100 nm (2×50 nm), which is negligible

for a 5 μm channel length (and likely also below the reproducibility range of the lithographic process). Furthermore, in Figure 5, we report the bias stress behavior of the TFTs as a function of the stress time. The TFTs were stressed at a field strength of +1 MV/cm ($V_{\text{GS}} = +20$ V and $V_{\text{DS}} = 0$ V) in the positive direction, and at a field strength of -1 MV/cm ($V_{\text{GS}} = -20$ V and $V_{\text{DS}} = 0$ V) in the negative direction at room temperature for a period of 10^4 seconds. The evolution of the transfer characteristics ($V_{\text{GS}} - I_{\text{DS}}$) of the TFT ($W = 15$ μm , $L = 5$ μm , and $\text{SP} = 10$ μm) as a function of the duration time is shown in Figure 5(a). The linear mobility of 12 $\text{cm}^2/(\text{V s})$, the SS^{-1} of 0.4 V/decade, and the $I_{\text{ON/OFF}}$ ratio of above 10^8 were very similar before and after the stressing, but a constant V_{TH} change of less than 1.2 V was observed in both the positive and negative directions, as shown in Figure 5(b). This shift should not be related to the Ca treatment because similar results have been observed when hydrogen plasma (SiN_x Inter-layer) was used to enhance the conductivity of S/D regions [Figure 5(c) and 5(d)] using an identical gate stack formation process. The small differences in the shifts could have been due to the different integration steps used in the stacks, but the overall V_{TH} shifts in both cases was most probably related to the interface change between a-IGZO and the gate dielectric layer (SiO_2). As mentioned, a low-temperature (250°C) SiO_2 was used as the gate dielectric layer. Normally, at this temperature, PECVD SiO_2 films suffer a high hydrogen content and poor passivating properties, which contribute to bias stress shift issues [6]. Longer anneal times and high temperature gate dielectrics might result in better bias stabilities.

4. Conclusion

In summary, we successfully fabricated SA a-IGZO TFTs with S/D regions treated with Ca. The TFTs showed a field-effect mobility of 12.0 $\text{cm}^2/(\text{V s})$, a SS^{-1} of 0.4 V/decade, and an $I_{\text{ON/OFF}}$ ratio above 10^8 . Thus, the low-temperature formation of S/D contacts in the SA a-IGZO TFT technology was demonstrated.

Acknowledgements

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Soeren Steudel received his M.Sc. degree in Electrical Engineering from the Dresden University of Technology in Germany and his Ph.D. degree from the Katholieke Universiteit in Leuven, Belgium, in 2002 and 2007, respectively. He has been working at IMEC since 2002 on TFTs and rectifying diodes. This work resulted in more than 20 journal publications, several patents, and numerous conference contributions. His research interests include flexible backplanes for display application, and process integration of organic and metal oxide semiconductor and thin-film circuits on foil. He is currently the team leader for organic and oxide electronic devices at IMEC.



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Oxide Circuitry at the Holst Center, a joint research initiative of TNO and IMEC.

Gerwin Gelinck joined Philips Research as a Senior Scientist in 1998, where he started working on polymer and organic transistors and their use in integrated circuits, displays, and memories. In 2002, he cofounded Polymer Vision. From 2002 to 2006, he was the Chief Scientist of Polymer Vision. Since 2007, he has been a Program Manager of Organic and



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